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IMAGINATIF IN PIERS PLOWMAN

Those who are interested in the history of the word *imagination* should not overlook the character, Imaginatif, who speaks at length in Piers Plowman. If, dissatisfied with Professor Skeat's brief note—"By *ymaginatif* is represented what we should call Imagination or Fancy"—the curious should turn to mediæval psychology as it took shape under Platonic, neo-Platonic, and Artistotelian influences, they would find themselves in touch with ideas and systems of great significance in the history of human thought and indispensable to an understanding of mediæval allegory. More particularly, they would see the character in Piers Plowman in its true light.

This character, it will be remembered, is a spokesman for Reason as a faculty consecrated to the service of God. He has often moved the poet to think of the end of life—(B. XII, 4) to prepare himself against the wrath to come. More than that, it is Imagination that recommends an accommodation of Kynde Witte to Clergye. In a chiasmic line he writes:—

Clergye and Kynde Witte comth of sijte and techynge.
And further down:

Of *quod scimus* cometh clergye and connyng of hevene
and of *quod videmus* cometh kynde witte of sijte of dy-
verse peple.

But this natural wit—this wit of bodily knowing¹—is near akin to the *quod scimus* of clergy, to the "connyng of hevene":—

"For-thi I conseille the for Cristes sake. Clergye that
thow lovyte

For Kynde Witte is of his kyn and neighe cosynes bothe
to owre lorde, leve me; for-thi love hem, I rede;

¹ In the *Promptorium Parvulorum* (E. E. T. S. ed. col. 531) we find *wytte of understondynge* glossed by *ingenium*; *wytte of bodely knowynge*, by *sensus*. In Chaucer's Boethius *wit* regularly translates the Latin *sensus*. Compare the following passage alluded to later on:—*Ipsum quoque hominem aliter sensus aliter imaginatio aliter ratio aliter intelligentia contuetur.* (De Consolatione. Bk. V, Prose IV, 79 ff.) Chaucer translates this: And the man himself otherweys wit beholdeth him, and otherweys imaginacioun, and otherweys resoun, and otherweys intelligence.

For bothe ben as miroures to amenden owre defautes,

And lederes for lewed men and for lettred bothe." (B-text)

Both Kind Wit and Clergy, then, aid us in our ascent to God. But a kind-witted man without Clergy is like a blind man in battle. Unless clerks help him this man "for all his kind wits" cannot be saved. Elsewhere *Imaginatif* speaks as one who knows about future rewards and punishments,—of the thief at the crucifixion, (B. XII, 196 ff.) of Jews, of Saracens (B. XII, 278 ff.); and he makes very clear the distinction between mere secular curiosity about the natural world and the use of its phenomena as similitudes of spiritual truth (B. XII, 236 ff.). To sum up, it appears that *Imaginatif* is not only the spokesman of Reason but is gifted with a vision of joy and sorrow to come, and is entitled to speak of the relation of Kind Wit and Clergy, and the uses to which in our spiritual education we should put the images, the phenomena, of the physical world.

Now these characteristics of *Imaginatif* are clearly accounted for by mediæval Christian psychology. The details are obvious in a twelfth century allegory by Richard of St. Victor, that was translated into English in the fourteenth century.² This treatise, the Benjamin Minor, presents Benjamin—adolescentulus in mentis excessu—as the embodiment of the highest stage of mystic contemplation, and accommodates to this symbolism the whole family of Jacob with the result that the growth of that family is made to typify the progress of the human soul along the mystic way. Jacob is God; his wives, Leah and Rachel, are respectively Affection and Reason; Zilpah, Jacob's concubine and Leah's maid is Sensuality; his other concubine, Bilhah, who is Rachel's maid, is Imagination. The sons of Jacob and Leah are Dread of Pain (Reuben), Sorrow of Sin (Simeon), Hope of Forgiveness (Levi), Love of Righteousness (Judah), Joy in Inward Sweetness (Issachar), Hatred of Sin (Zebulum), Ordained Shame (Dinah). The sons of Jacob and Zilpah are abstinence (Gad) and Patience (Asher). The sons of Jacob

² *Patrologia*, 196, Iff. Horstman, *Richard Rolle of Hampole*, I, 162 ff. *The Cell of Self-knowledge*, with introduction and notes by Edmund G. Gardner (London and New York, 1910), 3 ff.

and Rachel are Discretion (Joseph) and Contemplation (Benjamin). The sons of Jacob and Bilhah are Sight of Pain to Come (Dan) and Sight of Joy to Come (Naphtali).

Of this numerous progeny, the children of Leah were born first, because the first step in the life of contemplation is to surrender one's affections to God. Here, at the very threshold of the religious life appear contrition, hope, and the other symptoms of conversion. The stage here described corresponds to Langland's Vision of the Seven Deadly Sins, which immediately precedes that of Dowel. In the latter vision we pass from the theme of repentance to that of Wit, Study, Clergy, and Reason, as aids in the religious life. That is we turn from the general subject of the affections of man in the service of God to that of the mind of man in the service of God.

Now, according to Richard's allegory, it is Imagination that conducts man from the lower to the higher plane. In his allegory this is figured forth in the birth of Dan and Naphtali, Jacob's children by Bilhah (Imagination) after Leah had borne her seven sons. "For it falleth", says Richard,³ "to a perfect soul both to be inflamed with the fire of love in the affection, and also to be illumined with the light of knowing in the reason. Then when Judah waxeth, that is to say, when love and desire of unseen true goods is rising and waxing in a man's affection; then coveteth Rachel (Reason) for to bear some children;⁴ that is to say, then coveteth Reason to know these things that affection feeleth; for as it falleth to the affection for to love, so it falleth to the reason for to know. Of affection springeth ordained and measured feelings; and of reason springeth right knowings and clear understandings. And ever the more that Judah waxeth, that is to say love, so much desireth Rachel bearing of children, that is to say reason studieth after knowing. But who is he that woteth not how hard it is, and nearhand impossible to a fleshly soul the which is yet rude in ghostly studies, for to rise in knowing of unseeable things and for to set the

³ I use Mr. Gardner's version.

⁴ Just as the dreamer in *Piers Plowman* strove unsuccessfully to derive help from Reason before he is instructed by Imagination.

eye of contemplation in ghostly things? For why, a soul that is yet rude and fleshly, knoweth nought but bodily things, and nothing cometh yet to the mind but only seeable things. And, nevertheless, yet it looketh inward as it may; and that that it may not see yet clearly by ghostly knowing it thinketh by imagination. And this is the cause why Rachel had first children of her maiden than of herself. And so it is that, though all a man's soul may not yet get the light of ghostly knowing in the reason, yet it thinketh it sweet to hold the mind on God and ghostly things in the imagination". "Without imagination", says Richard in the Prologue to the Benjamin Minor, "reason may not know". From the above it is perfectly clear that Imagination, the maid of Reason, with the "two beholdings" for her children, bearing children before her mistress but after Leah (Affection), is the same Imagination who took the dreamer of *Piers Plowman* in charge after the confession of the Deadly Sins and after he had impatiently sought to know by reason alone.⁵

This imagination, to be traced to the Aristotelian φαντασία,⁶ played a prominent rôle in scholastic psychology from the time of Augustine. Its function was that of recording the images of the phenomenal world, not simply of noting but of retaining the multiple messages that come through the channels of the several senses to the unifying *sensus communis*.⁷ The *cella fantastica* was the repository of its records as the *cella rationalis* was the abode of the higher faculty.⁸

⁵ The opening passus of *Piers Plowman* in its transition from the theme of conversion to that of Reason—with her associates, Wit, Study, etc., and her sponsor, Imagination—follows then the way of mystic discipline. It is interesting to note that the dreamer goes off with *Activa Vita* after Reason is discredited.

⁶ Freudenthal, Ueber den Begriff des Wortes Φαντασία bei Aristoteles, Göttingen, 1863. Grote, Aristotle, II, 211 ff. Lutz, Die Psychologie Bonaventuras, Münster, 1909, (Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters, VI). Mignon, Les Origines de La Scolastique, I, p. 113.

⁷ Lutz, *op. cit.* p. 97.

⁸ In connection with that detail of Richard's allegory which represents the children of Imagination as Vision of Joy to Come and Vision of Sorrow to Come we might note what Bonaventura says in the *Itinerarium* (Chap. III) about Memory, which is often synonymous with Imagination: *Operatio autem memoriae est retentio et representatio, non solum prae-*

From all this it is clear that imagination was often equivalent to memory. But the point to be noted here is that in mediæval psychology imagination was not only a faculty of lower grade than reason but that in man's mental processes and the growth of his mind it mediated between the world of senses and the intellectual world.

The rôle of Imagination and its relation to Reason, set forth in a conveniently clear-cut manner in Richard of St. Victor's *Benjamin Minor*, receive more broadly philosophical treatment in the same writer's *Benjamin Major*.⁹ There we have distinguished six kinds of contemplation: ¹⁰ 1. In imaginatione et secundum solam imaginationem. 2. In imaginatione secundum rationem. 3. In ratione secundum imaginationem. 4. In ratione et secundum rationem. 5. Supra sed non praeter rationem. 6. Supra rationem et videtur esse praeter rationem. In connection with *Imaginatif's* discouragement of scientific curiosity and debate (B. XII, 217 ff.) we may note the following explanation of the first kind of contemplation: Tunc autem contemplatio nostra in imaginatione versatur, et secundum solam imaginationem formatur, quando nihil argumentando quaerimus vel ratiocinando investigamus; sed libera mens nostra huc illucque discurrit, quo etiam in hoc spectaculorum genere admiratio rapit.

That Richard, as we should have supposed, has drawn his psychology from his master Hugo of St. Victor becomes interestingly clear in Dr. Ostler's excellent study of the latter's system.¹¹ Dr. Ostler, moreover, traces the details of the psychology through the mazes of patristic speculation. Among other things he makes clear the essential similarity between the psychology of the Victorine and the following passage in the *De Consolatione Philosophiae*:— "A man himself is dif-

sentium, corporalium, et temporalium, verum etiam succedentium, simplicium et sempiternalium. Retinet namque memoria praeterita per recordationem, praesentia per susceptionem, futura per praevisionem.

⁹ Migne, 196, 63 ff.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.* Ch. VI.

¹¹ Ostler, Heinrich, *Die Psychologie des Hugo von St. Viktor*, Münster, 1906 (Beiträge zur Geschichte des Philosophie des Mittelalters, Band VI, Heft. 1.)

ferently comprehended by the senses, by imagination, by reason, and by intelligence. For the senses distinguish the form as set in the matter operated upon by the form; imagination distinguishes the appearance alone without the matter. Reason goes even further than imagination; by a general and universal contemplation it investigates the actual kind which is represented in individual specimens. Higher still is the view of the intelligence, which reaches above the sphere of the universal, and with the unsullied eye of the mind gazes upon that very form of the kind in its absolute simplicity." Similar accounts are given by St. Augustine in *De Anima et ejus Origine*, by William of St. Thierry, Isaac of Stella, Alcher of Clairvaux and Peter of Poitiers.¹² Bonaventura too, in the *Itinerarium Mentis ad Deum*, having divided the soul into *Sensualitas*, *Spiritus*, and *Mens*, attributes to *Sensualitas*, *sensus* and *imaginatio* and to *spiritus*, *ratio* and *intellectus*. Throughout we find the Imagination—what Hobbes calls "the decaying sense"—mediating as the character in Piers Plowman between the senses and the reason.

And this is, of course, the place of imagination, φαντασία, in the Aristotelian psychology as set forth in the *De Anima*. Distinguishing between the reproductive and the productive imagination, Aristotle in each case considers the faculty a function of the bodily organism and directly dependent upon sense perceptions. On the other hand, its operations are sufficiently similar to and closely enough connected with those of reason to justify our consideration of it as an intermediate faculty. Imagination is essential to the operation of the noëtic soul, just as the senses are necessary to the imagination. Aristotle uses expressions that are very closely paralleled in a sentence already quoted from Richard of St. Victor—"Without imagination reason cannot know". Aristotle says: οὐδέποτε νοεῖ ἄνευ φαντάσματος ἡ ψυχή. (*De Anima*, VII, p. 431, a. 16) and νοεῖν οὐκ ἔστιν ἄνευ φαντάσματος. (*De Memoria et Reminisc.*) I, pp. 449, 631.¹³

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¹² Ostler, *op. cit.* 119 ff.

¹³ Quoted by Grote, *op. cit.*, p. 211.